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The Gabbra: Traditional Social Factors in Aspects of Land-use Management

Daniel Stiles

The Gabbra are an Oromo-speaking camel pastoralist group who live in the arid lands of northern Kenya and southern Ethiopia. In spite of the harsh environment, the Gabbra can survive through the employment of a sophisticated land-use management system that stresses high mobility, social co-operation and high intensity labour inputs. A complex social organization, that enhances decision-making through political authority figures on the one hand, and reinforces social co-operation and solidarity through ritual and religious figures on the other, is crucial to the operation of land-use management strategies.

The Gabbra have evolved a unique and complex culture which allows them to survive in one of the harshest environments on earth. The 35,000 or so Gabbra live in northern Kenya and the lowlands of southern Ethiopia and depend largely on camels for survival. They have developed distinctive systems of time measurement (Kassam, 1984), of social organization and rituals, and of mutual co-operation, and they have a strict code of individual conduct. They share certain cultural features with the Boran and Rendille, but are a distinct ethnic group (Torry, 1973:45-46). The purpose of this paper is to present a summary of Gabbra social organization and to show how it ensures a successful integration between economic subsistence and natural resources. Attempted development efforts with the Gabbra could fail if these social factors are ignored.

Social Organization

There are five phratries, or sections, of the Gabbra: Algana, Galbo, Gara, Odhola and Sharbana. Each of them has a different origin, with the Boran, Somali and Rendille contributing clans in the past to make up each section. Each section is divided into two halves, with some clans belonging to the senior *Jiblo* half and the rest falling in the junior *Lossa* half. Each half, called a moiety

by anthropologists, elects a leader called a *Hayu*, so there are two *Hayus* for each section. These men come from only a few senior clans, called bull clans, and they must be of sound mind and body and display leadership characteristics. The *Hayus* act as judges in serious disputes and they are the most important political decision-makers. A *Hayu* from one phratry is respected by all of the phratries. Each clan also selects men to act as mediators in disputes, called *Jallaba*, who travel from place to place helping to resolve various problems, rather like a circuit court judge. They will even group together to resolve serious disputes, but if they fail, will refer the problem to a *Hayu*. The *Jallaba* can also help decide how labour is to be allocated, to ensure that all of the livestock are properly looked after and make certain that no one is left uncared for.

Each phratry selects three men to be custodians of the sacred paraphernalia, the Sacred Horn, the Sacred Drum, and the Firesticks. The Gabbra sometimes refer to themselves as the *Dibbe Shanana*, the "five drums", even though the Odhola lost their drum to the Rendille at some time in the distant past. Each phratry has a myth about how their drum and horn were originally found or made, and the mysticism surrounding these origins adds to their ritual power. The drum, horn, and firesticks, the latter used to light ritual fires, are used

during religious occasions. More will be said about them below.

The Gabbra are monotheistic and believe in a god they call *Waqqa*, to whom they pray every day when taking the camels out to pasture. The prayers beseech *Waqqa* to bless the camels and the Gabbra with peace and prosperity, and especially with rain. The Gabbra word for peace, *nagaya*, is often on the lips of the people. Communal prayers are often led by special men called *Kallu*, who are born into certain *Kallu* clans. The *Kallu* clans are those thought to be made up of descendants of the first Gabbra ancestors, who were said to have appeared on earth from heaven. *Kallu* men have the power to both bless and curse, so they are treated with respect. The most senior men from these clans are High *Kallu*, and they have very special ceremonial powers.

The Gabbra have a generation set system which they call *luba*, a simplified version of the Boran *gada* system (Legesse, 1973). Each male goes through six life stages, and he has certain duties or expected roles during each. The six grades are those of child, circumcised but unmarried young man, married man, Political Elder, Ritual Elder, and then Retired Elder. Females after marriage take on the *luba* grades of their husbands and they influence a great deal of decision-making through their husbands, particularly in regard to when and where to move the camp.

The *luba* system is central to Gabbra society, in that it controls what ideally is expected of each individual. It also defines human relationships. In theory, people change their *luba* grade after every 7 years in a ceremony called the *Jilla*. In practice, only five *Jillas* have been held this century due to the difficulties in organizing the month-long pilgrimage and ceremonies associated with it. The last one was held in 1986, but the next one will not be held in 1993 because there is no need yet for new officers, and to organize one is very difficult. Hundreds of people, including all of the officers and able-bodied elders, make the trek to the phratry sacred *Jilla* grounds

taking livestock and houses with them. All but the Odhola have their sacred *Jilla* grounds in southern Ethiopia, making it even more complicated in today's political instability.

I attended the 1986 Galbo phratry *Jilla* and was very impressed with the sanctity and seriousness displayed by the people during the many rituals that were carried out (Stiles, 1991). Some of the ceremonies involved the type of liturgical recitation and replies seen in some Christian church services, but with the Gabbra nothing is written down. The minds of the elders are the only library, and from what I observed it contains a wealth of information.

Men are circumcised around the age of 18 to 20 years and girls are clitoridectomized at 13 or 14. A person cannot marry, nor is he or she considered an adult, until this happens. Men usually marry in their early 30s and girls between the ages of 14 and 16, so there is a large age separation. This might sound strange, but there is a good reason for it, relating to the ownership and management of the family herds. The father, or patriarch as he could be called, has absolute control over all of the livestock until he dies. It is therefore advantageous to have his sons marry late so that there is less friction over control of the animals, and more cohesiveness of the nuclear family for co-operative labour in herding and watering the stock.

A man does not formally enter the *luba* system until he is married, when he ritually enters what is called the *kommicha* grade during the *Jilla* ceremony. This could be termed "junior elder" as he now has a say in discussions involving disputes, stock allocation, movements, and other secular matters. However, he cannot hold office until he becomes a Political Elder (*Yuba*), the next stage. The Political Elders control secular affairs and the Ritual Elders (*Dabela*) guide religious matters. They are the two most important grades in Gabbra society.

The *Hayus* and *Jallabas* mentioned above are installed at the *Jilla* by the High *Kallus* when the men enter the Political Elder grade. *Hayus* retain their office when they move

into the Religious Elder grade at the next *Jilla*, but now they wield only moral authority. The newly-appointed *Hayus* take over political power at the *Jilla* when the *kommicha* ("junior elders") become Political Elders. A man will take on the mantle of each type of elder for seven, fourteen, or even twenty-one years, depending on the interval between the *Jilla* ceremonies, which must be in cycles of 7 years. Gabbra measure time in 7-year cycles and each year receives the name of a day of the week. The *Jilla* is always held in a Friday year, except for the Gara section who perform it before the others in a Thursday year. This year, 1992, is a Thursday year.

The Ritual Elders wear a type of pill-box turban called a *hitu*. They will lead prayers and make blessings if no *Kallu* are present at the sacred ceremonies though, of course, a *Kallu* might also be a Ritual Elder if he had reached that stage. Ritual Elders are also responsible for looking after the *ada*, the traditional laws, which are meant to ensure that peace and prosperity come to the Gabbra in the times ahead. The custodians of the Sacred Drum (*Aba Dibbe*) and Firesticks (*Aba Uchuma*) are always Ritual Elders, while the Sacred Horn is given to the care of a Political Elder (*Aba Magalata*).

Each phratry has a special settlement called a *Yaa* in which many of the senior officers and their families are supposed to live. The *Yaa* is the spiritual, political, and jural headquarters for each phratry and though nomadic, like all Gabbra camps, each one is located within the traditional territory of the phratry. The *Jiblo* moiety *Hayu* must live there, as must the custodians of the sacred paraphernalia. Many Ritual Elders also live in the *Yaa*. The houses are arranged in two arcs running north-south, making an open-ended oval. In the centre of the *Yaa* is a ritual enclosure, the *nabo*, made up of *Acacia* thorn branches. The *nabo* is used for making prayers and other rituals, such as lighting the sacred fire with the Firesticks and beating the Sacred Drum when the *Yaa* is going to move, at the new moon, and on other occasions. Only men who have a *luba*

grade may enter the *nabo*, that is those who are either *kommicha* ("junior elders"), Political Elders, or Ritual Elders. The Retired Elders (*jarsa*) are very old men and they no longer take an active part in secular or religious affairs, except as participants in the same way that women and children take part.

This complicated social system, although described here in simplified fashion, is made up of interlocking facets that make up a time-honoured strategy that allows the Gabbra to continue to survive in their hostile environment.

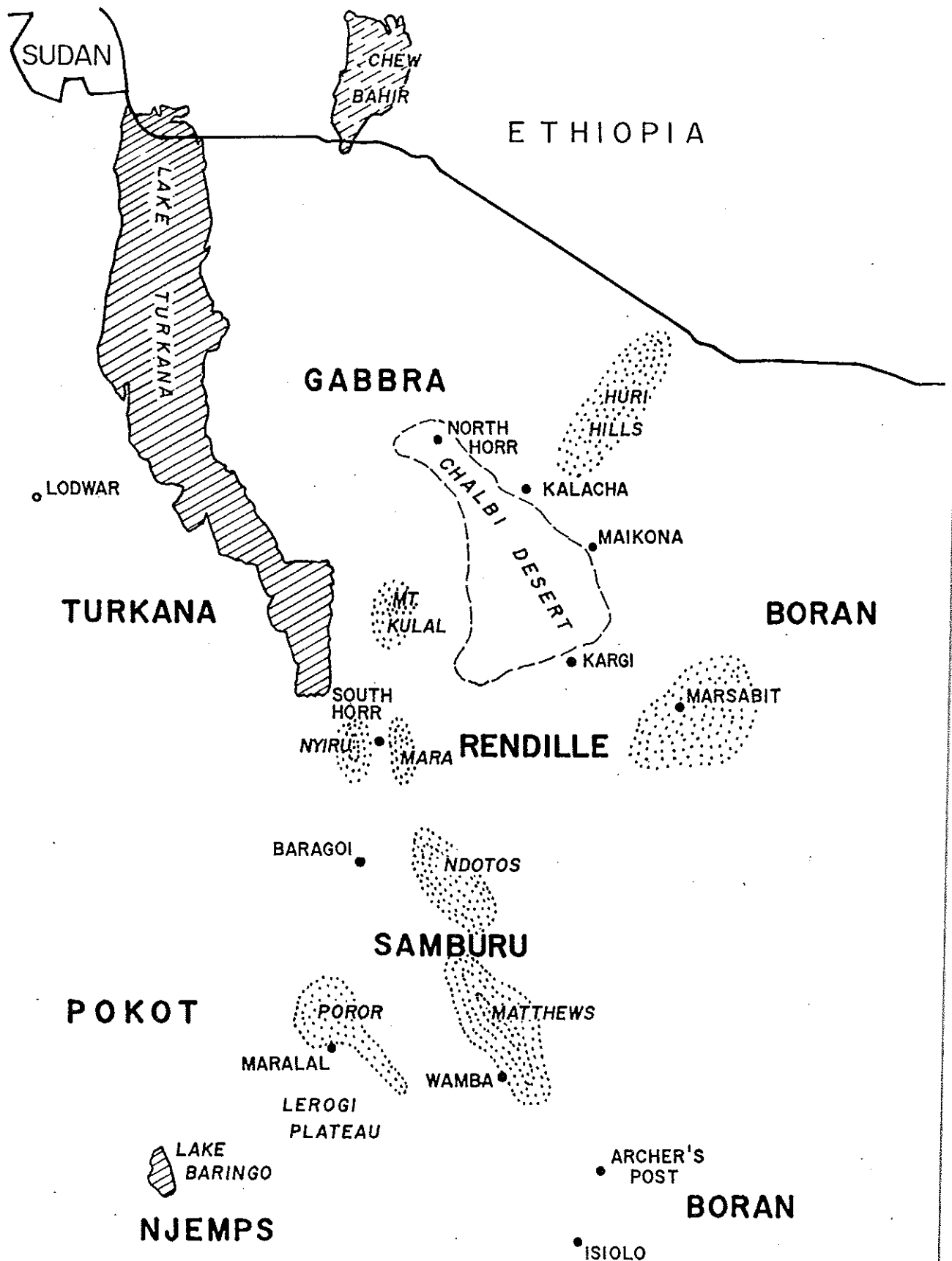
Gabbra Country

The 35,000 or so Gabbra (GoK, 1981) live in 40,000 square kilometres of land that extends to the Mega escarpment in Ethiopia in the north. Lake Turkana lies to the west, with the Bula Dera plain extending to the east. The southern boundary makes a rough line running from the northern part of Mount Marsabit through the southern end of the Chalbi and continuing to Lake Turkana.

The Gabbra are surrounded by intermittently hostile neighbours, except for the Boran to the east, who have been their historical allies. Unfortunately however, friction has recently arisen between these two peoples (Schlee, 1987). The Dassenetch live at the northern end of Lake Turkana and are the Gabbra's worst enemies. In recent years they have, armed with rifles, mounted very bloody raids to steal livestock. Periodic fights over grazing and wells also break out with the Rendille to the south, but since these are fought with spears the casualties are not usually very serious. The warlike Turkana live at the southern end of the lake that is named after them, and today they maintain an uneasy truce with the Gabbra.

The Gabbra have to cope with a rainfall that can at best be described as "very variable". It averages about 150–200 mm (6–8 inches) around the Chalbi, and up to 1,000 mm (40 inches) on the Marsabit and Kulal highlands (Bake, 1983). The Gabbra, however, use only the lower northern slopes of

Map 1. The Gabbra with surroundings



these highlands, as the cattle-keeping Samburu and Boran exploit the higher areas. A great deal of the land consists of a rocky lava plateau that is covered by a very sparse layer of thorn trees and shrubs and seasonal grass. There are no permanent streams or rivers anywhere in Gabbra country and the many seasonal stream beds are dry most of the time and turn into raging floods immediately after a storm. Most water courses drain into the Chalbi, which can become a shallow lake in the rainy season, though a few streams flow into Lake Turkana. There are two rainy seasons, a smaller one from October to early December, and the major one from April to June. Either or both of these might fail in any given year, causing great hardship on the people.

Water for humans and animals is found in a number of water holes and wells scattered unevenly over Gabbra land. The types of vegetation that are best for the different livestock—camels, cattle, sheep and goats—are also located in different areas, and their quality depends on whether rain has fallen and how much (Stiles and Kassam, 1991). The location of water and grazing are the most important factors governing Gabbra life. The great majority of Gabbra food comes directly from the livestock, and therefore the primary concern is making sure that the animals have enough to eat and drink, and that they stay healthy. The nomadic lifestyle is guided by the needs of the livestock. The Gabbra have to move their settlements several times a year to find the best grazing.

Management System

Three things permit Gabbra survival: social co-operation, mobility, and hard work. These three crucial elements are tightly controlled within the society by cultural rules, and these rules are reinforced by the Gabbra religion and the *luba* elders. Water is one of the critical elements for survival in the desert. There is great competition for use of the few wells and waterholes and the Gabbra cannot afford to fight over their use. At the height of the dry season there could

be dozens of herds waiting impatiently for their turn to water. It is an impressive sight to see hundreds of camels, cattle and small-stock all bellowing for water and kicking up clouds of dust in a huge mass around the well as the herders struggle to keep them at bay and await their allotted turn. There is order in the apparent chaos, however, as each herd is divided by species, and the watering can go on for 24 hours a day as each herdsman waits his turn for up to several hours.

The Gabbra have devised a system in which each well is assigned an "ownership" according to the clan or group of individuals who dug it, or their descendants if it is an old well. Each well has an *Abba Ella*, or "Father of the Well", who schedules which herds will water and when. The *Abba Ella* will be selected by the Political Elders living in the cluster of settlements which use the well. He must be a man known for fairness and strong will. Some of the wells can be more than 15 metres (50 feet) deep, and they are dug by hand. In the past, tradition decreed that iron could not be used to dig a well, but with the fall of the water table metal picks are now being used to reach the new depths. I made some very good Gabbra friends on one of my research trips by donating my pick to some men digging a well on the edge of the Chalbi.

A working well is impressive as all of the water is taken out by hand in a chain of up to six or eight men who position themselves from the bottom to the top using dug out ledges, underground rocks in the well wall, or constructed scaffolding to perch themselves on. They are often called the "singing wells" because the men keep up a rhythmic chant as they continuously pass the giraffe-skin containers, called *okole* up and down. *Okole*, which are also sometimes used to milk camels with, are the only type of container sanctioned by Gabbra tradition to be used in a well. The water from the *okole* is poured into a trough made of moulded mud from which the animals drink, and it must be constantly repaired under the onslaught of

hundreds of thirsty mouths and jostling animals.

The Gabbra are struggling not only with the natural environment, but also an increased hostility caused by human actions. The water table is falling due to the destruction of the forests by farmers and herders on Mounts Marsabit and Kulal, which is resulting in more surface run-off during the rains and less underground filtration of the rainwater into the underground hydrological system.¹ The Gabbra are well aware that this is happening, but they feel powerless to do anything about it.

The Gabbra traditionally depend entirely on their animals for survival. They do not grow crops. Camels are the most important animals to the Gabbra as they provide most of the staple milk, much of the meat, and about half of the blood, which is mixed with milk and drunk mainly by the young men. A good milch camel will provide 10 litres of milk a day during the wet season and up to 5 litres a day in the dry period (Brémaud, 1969; Simpkin, 1985:114). Camels also provide the mobility that permits villages to move often and at short notice to follow the rain, which falls in small patches here and there in localised thundershowers. The houses are actually more like tents, made of goatskins and woven mats laid over a dome of bent tree saplings and branches. They can be dismantled and packed onto the backs of camels in a matter of hours. Camels also make it possible to establish camps far from water points, as they can be used to bring water to the camps. These loaded camels are often referred to as "ships of the desert" as they haul their cargos across the barren plains.

Cattle are not as important as camels to the Gabbra, since they cannot live in the dry countryside. They are kept most of the time in satellite camps in the highlands, though cows with milk are brought to the main camps during the rainy season. During the rains a cow will give up to 2 litres a day for human consumption, but during the dry season all of the milk must go to the calf if it is going to survive. Sheep and goats, the

small-stock, are important for meat, for trade in grain, cloth, sugar, tea, tobacco, etc., and for sacrifice in the many Gabbra ritual ceremonies. Rules of livestock ownership and transfer are also very complex and are controlled by traditional laws which all respect.

The Gabbra call their main camp an *ola*. This *ola* could comprise as few as three houses or as many as twenty. Each *ola* has a headman and the *ola* is named after him. The houses are arranged in an irregular line running north-south, with the northern end pointing symbolically to the Gabbra homeland in southern Ethiopia. The doors normally face west, away from the prevailing and usually very strong south-east wind. In the dry season, only the camels with milk and some pack camels are kept at the *ola*, along with some of the small-stock. The dry camels, cattle, and much of the small-stock will each be sent out to different satellite camps called *fora*, though the small-stock camp is more commonly called an *arjalla* by the Gabbra. During the dry season, most of the young men and some of the married men, widowed women and young boys and girls will be out in the *fora* looking after the stock.

This splitting of the herds puts a tremendous strain on the Gabbra to find all the necessary labour to herd and water the animals, which results in the highest level of work recorded for any society in the world (Torry, 1973:167). It has been calculated that the animals of one household demand the attention of 10 to 11 people for 9 hours a day every day of the week during the 8 months of the two dry seasons. During the rainy season, "only" six to seven people are needed 9 hours a day, because most of the animals are brought back to the *ola* (Torry, 1973:153-154). Organizing adequate labour is one of the biggest jobs, and may explain, at least in part, why the Gabbra have devised a social organization that embodies strong political authority.

The Gabbra split their herds in the dry season because this is the only way they can find adequate forage for the livestock. If all

of the animals were kept at the *ola* in the dry period the surrounding forage would soon be exhausted. During the rains there is a flush of green plant growth, providing the animals with more food of much better nutritional quality than during the dry period and enabling the herds to congregate at the *ola*. Much singing and dancing and important events such as weddings take place during the rains.

A household is made up of the patriarch, his wife or wives, and his married and/or unmarried children. Gabbra men rarely have more than one wife. Generally a man takes a second wife because he has assumed the responsibility of looking after the widow of his deceased brother, if she doesn't have a son to look after her, or else because his first wife is barren. Often a man will live in the same *ola* as his married sister, and he will join with his brother-in-law to form a stock management unit called a *solola* to pool the livestock and the labour of the two families. Less frequently, brothers will do the same thing. Sometimes even more than two households join together into a *solola*. Communal living and sharing is a key to Gabbra survival.

Each *ola* decides collectively when and where to move and how to divide up the herds into *fora*, though by definition the herds are partitioned by *solola*. The people of the *ola* co-ordinate their herding activities to manage best the available pasture and water points, and to provide defence against possible raiders. Sometimes many *ola* are set up close to one another, especially in the dry season when they are more dependent on permanent water points. The *ola* which co-ordinate with one another in a single area form a cluster the Gabbra call a *rera*. Most of the people living in the *rera* will be from one phratry, though it is not uncommon for households from more than one phratry to live in the same camp. Some of the work activities such as watering livestock and collecting plant materials for use in house construction may be carried out collectively by the *rera*, and a common meeting place

called a *fula gahs* will be set up somewhere in the shade of a large tree.

The *fula gahs* is presided over by a *Hayu*, *Jallaba* or *Kallu* clan member of the Political Elder grade, and he is usually the head of an *ola* as well. Discussion topics usually involve land or livestock management issues—moves to new pastures, watering schedules, labour or stock allocations etc. These assemblies epitomize the articulation of social organization with management decision-making.

Social Co-operation

Individuals or even whole families could not survive on their own in the Chalbi area. Misfortune is part of life and is accepted with stoicism by the Gabbra. Livestock are lost during droughts or as a result of disease, and can be stolen in a raid, or must be transferred to another family as brideprice when a man gets married. Increasingly these days, animals are taken by the government as "voluntary" donations for so-called development projects. The population is growing in response to improved health care, so more animals are needed to feed the new mouths. There is a great deal of uncertainty and risk involved in depending on livestock in an environment that changes so often in both climatic and socio-economic terms, so the food supply of any one household can fluctuate greatly from season to season and from year to year.

To counter these risks, each Gabbra household creates for itself a web of ties with others that establish mutual responsibilities for various kinds of assistance, be it in terms of labour or animals. The overall result of this social cat's cradle is the more or less even distribution of the available food and workforce throughout the entire society, re-allocating temporary surpluses to cover points of deficit.

The mechanisms that the Gabbra have evolved are the various kinship ties mentioned above, in which related households pool their resources, and additional two

mechanisms that involve kinship. The first is called the *abuya* relationship, in which a boy's mother's brother, that is his maternal uncle, becomes a special person in his life. It is common for a boy to herd animals of his *abuya* for several years and, in return, the uncle gives presents of livestock to the boy at his birth, circumcision, and marriage. When a young man goes to battle he takes the spear of his *abuya*, and if he returns with looted livestock he turns this over to his *abuya*. In return, the *abuya* holds a celebration feast for his nephew and sacrifices goats for a 4-day feast the climax of which is the gift of a young female camel to the nephew. When the boy marries he often becomes a stock associate with his *abuya* and they lend each other animals that either lacks or needs respectively. When either is short of food, they can borrow from each other, and there are many traditional things such as stock sacrifices in blessing rituals that they do for each other.

The second type of relationship is called *halkuma*, in which certain clans have a tradition of giving and/or taking wives from each other. In this instance the father of a man to be married would look first into the clan of his mother or of his wife to find a prospective wife for his son. This repeated inter-marriage between clans creates numerous kinship links that have mutual obligations of assistance, including the *abuya* one mentioned above.

Another type of link is much more distant and involves historical relationships between certain Gabbra clans and Boran clans. The institution is called *tiriso* and only applies to Gabbra clans that do not have a Boran origin, as Boran do not have *tiriso* between themselves. In the 16th or 17th century, when the Boran were expanding out of southern Ethiopia, they encountered various pastoralists speaking Somali-related languages in northern Kenya. Through their military strength they were able to subdue or intimidate these Somali-related peoples to become Boran clients or vassals. The Boran created fictitious, rather symbolic, clan links between these clans and

various Boran clans, in which they came to have mutual obligations much like members of one clan would have for one another. This relationship meant that when a Boran of say the Karayu section, Bere clan travelled into Gabbra country, he could expect hospitality from a Gabbra of the Sharbana phratry, Barot clan because they had *tiriso* ties. During extreme hardship, when most people are affected and even the kinship networks cannot provide sufficient assistance, Boran or Gabbra might in desperation try to borrow stock or beg food from distant *tiriso* associates. There are documented cases that even when the potential donors were in dire straits themselves, they gave gifts or loans of a few animals to the supplicants in need. Such is the strength of traditional bonds amongst these Oromo-speaking pastoralists that even near strangers will help one another when an obligation is called for.

The last type of network that is established between Gabbra, regardless of clan, is the institution of stock associate alluded to earlier. Different types of animals are transferred from one person to another in different ways, each with its own specific rules. The two simplest methods are the direct gift of an animal, with no expectation of reciprocation from the receiver, and the exchange of one animal for another of approximately equal value. These two methods do not actually constitute stock association, but they should be mentioned as they are ways of transferring stock.

The most common type of true stock association is called *dabaree* by the Gabbra. A man borrows a young female camel from another man. He raises the camel and keeps it until it becomes too old to give birth, whereupon he returns it to the owner, along with any second-generation female offspring. The borrower keeps the first-generation females, though technically these are still on loan. The owner could demand them back, but normally he uses the debt incurred from the loan of the first camel and the continued use by the borrower of the offspring to claim other benefits. These could

be support in a dispute with a third party, gifts of stock to his children when they are circumcised or married, or possibly a *dabaree* cow. The same rules apply to cows as with camels.

A man is supposed to take particularly good care of *dabaree* animals, and if he does not the owner may reclaim them. Only the patriarch of a family can enter into *dabaree* partnerships, though married sons can do so with their father's permission. When the father dies, the eldest son inherits all of the *dabaree* animals of his father. A man could maintain several *dabaree* associations, both on the giving and receiving end, and this mesh of stock-sharing relationships serves again to allocate food where it is needed most while not upsetting the status of property ownership.

The Gabbra manage to distribute animals, food, and labour through these various kinship relations and stock partnerships in a complex web of giving, lending, and receiving. This strategy has worked very well over the generations to reduce the risk involved in living in the arid north of Kenya.

Religious Reinforcement

The Gabbra systems of resource management and social co-operation are reinforced by the strong moral authority of their sophisticated religion, which contains various mystical, ethical, and calendar elements. The Gabbra have twelve lunar months, and six of these are considered to be propitious for carrying out various activities and ceremonies such as buying and selling livestock, marriage, and wild sisal-collecting expeditions (used in house-mat manufacture). The other six months are unpropitious and these activities are avoided.

Three of the months are particularly propitious and are known as the "camel months". In each of these months a ceremony called the *sorio* is held in which family members and all of the camels must be present at the *ola*. Livestock are sacrificed and prayers are made calling for peace, prosperity, and rain. The blood of the ani-

mals runs literally and symbolically into the ground as an expiation for all of the sins committed since the last *sorio*. During the *sorio* almost everyone comes in from the *fora* and so it is an occasion to reinforce family and other kin solidarity. The *Jilla* must also be held in one of these months.

The third *sorio* takes place during the last lunar month, which marks the end of the Gabbra year. It seems almost always to take place sometime in November. A special ceremony called *Almado* also takes place in the last month and it marks the end of one year and the start of the new one. Three weeks of ritual activities are held to celebrate it. Each week ritual fires are lit in the *ola*. The first week the fire is lit on the day of the week after which the current year is named, the second week on the day that the new year will be named, and the last week also on the day of the current year. During these three weeks the women go out to collect a creeper called *galle* which they put on their houses and at the gates of the livestock kraals. *Galle* is thought to protect camels and homes from any kind of evil. *Ola* should not move during this period and, except for ritual sacrifice, no blood should be spilt, so there are no raids, hunting expeditions, or circumcision ceremonies during this period.

There are also propitious days of the month. The first half of the new moon, while the moon is waxing, is called "the light days", and "the dark days" are the second half of the month, the waning moon. The light days are propitious and the *sorios* are held on the ninth, tenth, and fourteenth days of the month. The 9th day is for members of the *Jiblo* moiety, the 10th day is for *Lossa* people, and the 14th day is for anyone who missed the other days. At the beginning of each month a new moon ritual is held, when the patriarch of each household sticks small balls of myrrh resin (*kumbi*) on the foreheads of all male members of the family. A special song is sung and a libation of milk is made to the ancestors.

Propitious days of the week are Sunday, Monday, Thursday and Friday. *Olas* will only move on these days, marriages are

restricted to them, and so forth. Burials will be held on one of the other days of the week, since a burial is obviously unpropitious.

Much ritual surrounds the treatment of camels. They are considered to be on the same moral plane as people and to have a mystical relationship with *Waq*. Camels only change hands on propitious days during the light days in the three "camel months" on even-numbered days. Camels can also only be sacrificed on these days, though they can be slaughtered for food on any propitious day of any month. Sunday is considered to be "camel day"; camps cannot move on this day, unless it is threatened with attack, and camels are not sent to fora on this day. Baggage camels are not worked on Sundays and all camels must sleep in the camp or *fora kraal*, not out in the bush. Men born on Sunday cannot sleep on camel hides nor wear camel-skin sandals.

Camels or camel products are not supposed to be sold in markets, as this degrades their status and could bring misfortune on the owner's other camels, though this tradition is beginning to break down under economic stress. Female camels can only be transferred to other camel people such as the Rendille or Somali. Castrated male camels can be exchanged or given to cattle people or others, but the Gabbra believe that non-camel people do not know how to care properly for camels. According to the Gabbra, if a female or bull should be transferred to a non-camel person it would eventually become sick or die and this would bring bad luck on Gabbra camels in general.

There are many classifications of camels, according to their ancestry, age, sex, relationship to reproduction etc., and many rituals surround the different categories of camel which are too numerous to detail here. Suffice it to say that the Gabbra spend much of their time observing these camel rites and the ultimate purpose of them is to ensure that camels are properly treated and respected so that they will continue to provide the life-supporting services that allow Gabbra survival. Camels have the quality

of *lagu*, which means that they must be treated with the proper respect or they can exact revenge on the offender in some mystical way, usually by affecting his or her future prosperity.

Certain officials such as the *Hayu*, High *Kallu*, and the sacred paraphernalia custodians also have *lagu* and they are believed to be endowed with hereditary or acquired divine powers which allow them to communicate with *Waq*. This belief, and the fear of a ritual curse, put pressure on the Gabbra to adhere to the strict traditions that induce them to behave communally in the interests of the whole Gabbra nation.

Change

Many things are forcing change in Gabbra society. Missionaries are converting Gabbra to Christianity and telling them that to believe in *Waq* makes them pagans; government officials pressure children to go to school, depriving households of much-needed labour; "development" projects try to introduce new ways of doing things, rather than strengthen a system that already works; bore holes are being drilled that disrupt traditional watering and grazing patterns, because the Gabbra are not consulted; various do-gooders encourage the Gabbra to move to the highlands to become farmers and destroy more forest that will lower the water table in the plains even further; oil prospecting teams cut seismic lines through valuable pasture and hire Gabbra temporarily to help with menial tasks, luring them away from their animals with money.

Many argue that what they call progress must come to northern Kenya. The Gabbra and the other peoples there cannot persist as "living museums", they must eventually enter the 20th century. The children have to be educated so that they can participate in nation-building and modern life. Unfortunately, modern life usually means hanging around permanent settlements or towns, looking for jobs that do not exist or getting into trouble. It is a sad sight to see demor-

alized and alienated young Gabbra who have received Western-style education. They lose respect for their own culture, but have nothing tangible with which to replace it. An undefined, unfulfilled longing for something better afflicts them, and few are capable or willing to work the long hours or make the personal sacrifices required of a true Gabbra in the² traditional lifestyle. Some drift into alcoholism and petty crime.

Progress is a relative notion. Westerners believe in constant progress, which is a linear concept which involves passing through stages from worse to better or primitive to advanced in economic and technological terms. The Gabbra think in cycles, symbolized by their seven-year calendar cycle, the recurrent *Jilla*, and movement through the repeated generation sets. For them progress is continuing to survive, increasing the herds, and ensuring that everyone is taken care of. It is a communal philosophy as opposed to the West's focus on the individual. Change is inevitable in any society, but change initiated from the inside is preferable to that being imposed from the outside.

Gabbra culture will one day break down under the onslaught of Western ideas, but this will not usher in a new millennium of progress and prosperity for the Gabbra. It will signify the death of a people and of a unique culture, and it is difficult to imagine how the Gabbra will be able to survive in that region of the world without their traditions to give them the necessary strength.

Notes

¹ The ground waters in different aquifers were dated, groundwater flow velocities estimated, and aquifer recharge rates calculated (Bake, 1984:58; Lusigi, 1984:83). Bake (pers. comm.) concluded that fossil water was being used at waterholes, wells and bore holes and that use exceeded recharge. He attributed deforestation in the highlands to reducing recharge rates. The Gabbra have also noted the continued drop of the water table in wells.

² Some of the long-term missionaries in the area appreciate the problem and have started programmes to rehabilitate people to the pastoralist lifestyle.

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